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THE STATE OF PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE U.S. AND ABROAD: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE RHINE CENTER'S SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW CHRISTINE SIMMONDS-MOORE

by Hillary Webb, PhD

Christine Simmonds-Moore is currently the Senior Research Fellow at The Rhine Research Center (successor to the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory) in Durham, North Carolina. From an early age, Simmonds-Moore had been interested in paranormal and extraordinary experiences—phenomena that were part of the lived experience of several of her family members ("My gran once dreamed all six numbers of the national lottery—but didn't put any money on it"). Simmonds-Moore herself approached the subject from a more academic angle. While attending Swansea University in Wales, she came across a number of books on parapsychology in the university library.

"There were lots of books on parapsychology," she says, "but I thought parapsychology must be dead because all the journals in the library stopped at about 1975. But I thought I'd have a look and read them. I later found out that the skeptic Hansel had been at Swansea, and that was the reason for the presence of the books and journals. I was doing my undergraduate research project on the hypnogogic state, and I realized that a lot of paranormal experiences happen during that state. And so I decided that I wanted to do a study on the hypnogogic state and [related] aspects of consciousness and dream research."

After earning a master's degree in Cognitive Science at Dundee University, Simmonds-Moore returned to North Wales to take a teaching and research position at Bangor University. It so happened that a PA member, Robert Turner, was running a short parapsychology class in Bangor, where she realized that "the field of parapsychology is very much alive." She was put in contact with the late Bob Morris, who at the time held the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh. Morris eventually become her "academic grandfather," when Simmonds-Moore later went on to earn her Ph.D. on the psychology of anomalous experiences (with a focus on anomaly-prone personalities) at Northampton University in England under the supervision of Morris's student Chris Roe. As part of her training during that time, Simmonds-Moore traveled to The Rhine Research Institute's North Carolina campus in order to attend the 2-month parapsychology Summer Study Program (SSP).

"[Up to that point] I'd heard of some of the people and some of the terms, but I didn't know how everything [in parapsychology] fitted together," she recalls. "So getting the opportunity to go to The Rhine was just amazing. It was 2 months of intense training in parapsychology. You lived, breathed, and slept parapsychology. You met researchers and philosophers and skeptics and physicists and you were able to talk with those people about their ideas and the students about

parapsychology. So that's how I first got to The Rhine. [It was] sort of a pathway through my own interests—hypnogogia and realizing that parapsychology was alive."

After returning to the UK to finish her Ph.D., Simmonds-Moore took a teaching position at Liverpool Hope University, where, as luck would have it, there happened to be a position open for a parapsychology teacher. During that time, she returned to The Rhine Research Center twice, for a 2003 and a 2009 sabbatical. After 10 years teaching at Liverpool Hope, Simmonds-Moore left the UK to take the position of Senior Research Fellow at The Rhine Research Center. During our conversation, we spoke about the differences in how the fields of parapsychology and consciousness studies are approached and supported in our two continents; the recent uproar about Bem's upcoming article on ESP research to be published in the American Psychological Association's *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*; The Rhine Center's research focus; and, finally, her vision for a more integrated consciousness-parapsychology future.

Hillary Webb: Something I'm curious about is how parapsychology is approached, treated, and supported—or not supported—in the United Kingdom as opposed to the United States. Based on your experiences, what do you see as the differences and similarities?

Christine Simmonds-Moore: The biggest difference is that, in the U.S., places that are studying parapsychology are generally separated from universities. I think there's one unit left—the [Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia]—that is still part of a university, but I don't think there are many others. There's Saybrook University. At Saybrook you can do some parapsychology, and there certainly was a parapsychology course at the University of West Georgia. On the other hand, in the UK—I think in Europe too, but in the UK in particular—there is a model that parapsychology is part of psychology, and so there are about 16 universities in the UK where you can study parapsychology or something equivalent as part of an undergraduate psychology degree.[1]

A lot of that is [due to] the work of Bob Morris. He was an American—he passed away in 2004—who was the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at Edinburgh. His philosophy was to try to get parapsychology into the mainstream. The way that he taught all of us was that you should always have an area of expertise in normal [psychology] and then look at paranormal and see if you can find some links, [building] a bridge between the two. [That way] you can get a job in a normal psychology department and you can be an integral member of that department, but you can also do the stuff that makes you happy. That was his philosophy. A lot of the universities in the UK where you can study parapsychology, the faculty members are graduates of the Edinburgh program or are the [academic] grandchildren of Bob Morris. So, people have tried to become experts in other areas, too. Mine is looking at personality and differences between healthy and less

healthy people who score high on the positive schizotypy dimension. And also in research methods. Parapsychologists have to be really good at research methods, and so a lot of people have gone on to teach research methods in mainstream psychology departments.

[That model] isn't always an easy ride, but it's there, and, when it works, it can work quite well. But [even in the UK] you do still have a lot of resistance, and people are not always aware of what parapsychology is or what consciousness studies is until they talk to you. That's the same between the countries. I think if people realize what you are doing and what your approaches are, then they soften, but the bias is there in both countries. I think somewhere there is the realization that if someone can do a job, then maybe it's ok if they do this other stuff as well. And people are realizing that there is value in studying unusual experiences, whatever your interpretation. In the last year [in the UK], there has been the introduction of anomalistic psychology into the A-level programs. The A-level is the exam you do at the age of 18, and the A-level now includes a course on anomalistic psychology. This is a great shift as well, because there are going to be a lot of students now who finish school aware of this thing that you can study. It's taught very skeptically, very critically, [and] takes a range of experiences and tries to explain everything normally. However, I think that might shift as well. [Palgrave MacMillan Publishers have] commissioned a book on anomalistic psychology as part of a whole series of textbooks. Some of my colleagues in the UK and I are co-writing that book. So, we're trying to infiltrate from within. We can be critical and [acknowledge that] there are all these different explanations, but [also say,] "Hey, let's look at all the explanations that include the psi hypothesis and see what's been done!"

I think that's quite exciting that that book is coming out as part of a series of psychology books and that younger kids are going to be studying this stuff, which means that more people are going to be wanting a university education. That is very healthy, even though there is some resistance. I've felt it firsthand. I had to stand up and represent our research group at Liverpool, and I could hear sniggering at the back of the group when I first stood up. And then, actually, afterwards several people came up to me and they were like, "Oh, I didn't realize it was this or this or this."

HW: It sounds like some preconceived notions, but perhaps there is slightly more openness to it over there than here.

CSM: Yeah.

HW: It's been suggested that the European mindset is more aligned with a broad and classical understanding of human nature, while the U.S. tends towards a more positivistic/materialistic and behavioral perspective. As a result, academia in the U.S. is

less inclined to acknowledge some of the nonlinear aspects of human experience. Perhaps that accounts for some of the slight differences.

CSM: I think you're right. That's something I've noticed about psychology departments over here. They seem to be very old fashioned. You don't generally see much evidence of qualitative research. At Liverpool, [the study of] qualitative research methods was half the research course. Here [in the U.S.] it tends to be very old fashioned. A pattern I see in both countries—which is a depressing pattern and I hope it's not true—[is that] it seems like the new universities that are trying to get themselves established are much more open to studying things that are a bit more unusual, but then when they get more established some of them then try to move away from parapsychology. Like Duke, for example. My university that I just left in the UK wants to remove parapsychology from the curriculum, and so from the next academic year, it will no longer be part of the psychology degree. I think that's quite sad.

HW: What is that about? Is that a sign of a philosophical shift, or an economic one, or something else entirely? Any theories on why that is?

CSM: They want to compete with the bigwigs. I think somewhere it's an economic decision, but I don't think they've really thought it out because if they were aware of the whole picture—i.e., that more students are going to want to be studying this stuff at A-level and looking for universities where they would be able to study this—then they would think again. I don't know. It seems like at some universities there's this thing about prestige, and after awhile they don't want to be associated with things that are not mainstream, despite their popularity. For example, at Liverpool Hope, they recently brought two new professors into the psychology department who are strongly cognitive and somewhat uncomfortable with parapsychology.

HW: I imagine you've heard about the uproar from many in the psychology community regarding the upcoming article in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that presents what the author considers to be strong evidence for extrasensory perception. Some scientists support the report, saying it deserves to be published in the name of open inquiry, but there are many others who are furious, who consider its publication a flaw in the peer review process and believe that it should not be published at all.

CSM: I think the whole discussion is quite interesting as a research topic—the extremity of the reaction. It is fascinating. [Apparently] there is going to be a published rejoinder commenting on the critique that's come out, which has taken a Bayesian analysis of Bem's data. The authors of the critique claim that the Bayesian approach demonstrates no evidence of psi, but that is potentially because a Bayesian probability depends on an a priori evaluation of the likelihood of finding a given outcome. And if you come from a

skeptical perspective, then the probability of finding evidence for psi may not be very likely. I am less familiar with the Bayesian approach than the usual "hypothesis testing" model, but it seems inherently biased, which is problematic if something as controversial as psi is being evaluated. Bem and others have published a rejoinder, or will hopefully be publishing one in the same journal. This will say that the Bayesian approach can be very useful, but you really do need to look at the whole spectrum of findings to come up with a more accurate a priori probability level. I think the skeptical reactions are quite depressing but also interesting (from the perspective of social science) to see how people are reacting to these findings.

HW: At some point, their resistance says more about them and their beliefs than it does about the data.

CSM: It does, definitely. "We don't know how this works so it cannot be true" . . .

HW: . . . "This doesn't fit into my worldview; therefore, I refuse to acknowledge the data."

As a researcher it seems that any research you do, at some point you bump up against yours or somebody else's ontology and philosophy. It's hard to move past that. All we have is data, not proof. Just a bunch of ideas, which, frankly, I find fun and exciting. I enjoy the mystery. I'm not so much looking for proof but rather data that leads to the opening of further questions.

CSM: I enjoy the mystery, too. And also how people construct their own experience and find meaning. That's a separate thing. Even if there were a million experiments that found there was no evidence of ESP, I think these things are still valuable to study. People have experiences and sometimes they are life transforming and bring people great meaning and [improved] mental heath. There is value [to these experiences], even if there is no ESP.

HW: Exactly. Asking, "What is the meaning behind it for people?"

CSM: Yeah.

HW: So tell me a little about how The Rhine approaches the study of consciousness—its methodologies, basic philosophies.

CSM: Traditionally, The Rhine Center has been very experimental. If you go back to the days of J. B. Rhine, J.B. Rhine revolutionized the study of paranormal phenomena by developing the card-guessing tests and also the systematic revision of methodologies [so that they are] sensitive to criticism. And also trying to develop methods where you can test a lot of people—not necessarily just special claimants but students. That was

one thing that Rhine started—the idea that you don't necessarily have to have people who think that they are very, very psychic—although those people do come in and Rhine certainly started off by testing mediums at the very beginning of his career. So, yeah, rigorous, repeatable methods and being able to test lots of people [is part of The Rhine legacy]. In the middle years, they were focusing more on the experimental methods—card tests and then looking at PK research and seeing if people could influence the die, and then Dr. Helmut Schmidt developed PK machines that were based on random-event generators. Again, it was this idea of, "Let's find something that we can actually measure; let's measure the deviation away from chance." So, historically, The Rhine has always focused on statistics and using the scientific method to see whether you've got an anomaly and then seeing if you can repeat that anomaly and see if you can find patterns there.

At the same time, the history of The Rhine has also embraced subjective experiences in the work of Louisa Rhine, so I suppose always there has been the history of both: rigorous, repeatable experimental methods, looking for patterns—as in, is there ESP? Is there PK?—but also what do people [subjectively] experience in the real world? What are people reporting? The current research group at The Rhine, we've got [researchers interested in both experimental and qualitative methods]. I think that using complementary and mixed methods is the ultimate way to find out how something is working and getting the fullest picture of that thing. I've been trying to promote the qualitative. I'm fascinated by experimental methods but also by personality. I'm fascinated by experiences, [regardless of] whether there is any truth to them or not, just because I think they are part of human nature. What I've gotten interested in lately are the differences between "healthy" and "less healthy" paranormal experiences. For example, can you do something to help people become more healthy if they have less healthy experiences?

Most of my recent studies have been like that, trying to approach a subject from lots of different perspectives. What I'm trying to do as well is link things between normal and paranormal.

HW: What's your vision for the future of this field?

CSM: I would like there to be more fusion between consciousness studies, parapsychology, anomalistic psychology, and mainstream psychology. I think they have a lot to say to each other. It frustrates me a lot of the time [that] mainstream psychology is so compartmentalized. For example, I have colleagues who are investigating the psychology of belief from the perspective of the psychology of religion. There are many parallels here with parapsychology. There are so many [different fields] that have parallels, but they don't talk to each other. I just wish that things could be a little more

integrated. People need to be doing more experiments that cross the boundaries. And I think parapsychologists and people researching this should do normal research as well as asking the psi questions because I think more studies that are crossing the boundaries will be [essential] for pushing this field forward. I think it's a shame that in the U.S. the parapsychology units are separate from the universities. There's an advantage at some level with that because you can do more quirky, interesting research properly if you're not in the university and you've got more time to do research. But, then, you've got the problem of funding, and so you see a lot of places struggling or trying to work out a way to bring in money. It would be nice if there were some kind of sustainable way of being able to do this research and push it forward. It always seems to me that the best place is within the university environment. But I don't know how that's going to shift unless there can be a Bob Morris-type model in which people can sell themselves doing something normal and then gradually bring in the other stuff. None of this work is so frightening. We are asking questions that are actually quite normal at some level. A lot of people [in the parapsychology field] are not even asking the psi questions, and, even when they are, it shouldn't be frightening. It should be about asking questions and seeing what the data tell you. So, my dream would be for there to be more of a fusion. I don't know if that is an unrealistic dream. Some days it feels like it's possible and other days it doesn't.

Maybe the publication of [the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*] article will stimulate conversation around that. Maybe that will encourage more discussion. Or a debate, at least! The APA meeting this August is supposed to be a debate with skeptics and proponents discussing this topic, based on the book that Stanley Krippner and Harris Freidman just published [*Mysterious Minds: The Neurobiology of Psychics, Mediums, and Other Extraordinary People* (with H. L. Friedman) (2009). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger]. It's really an interesting book. With more things like that in the public domain, APA sponsored, that's excellent. That's going to move things forward.

Christine Simmonds-Moore can be reached at Christine@rhine.org. The Rhine Research Center website is www.rhine.org.

The Rhine Research Center (RRC) launched its first online course, Introduction to Parapsychology, in March, 2011. Simmonds-Moore was recently awarded a Bial grant, which is seeking people who are synesthetes to take part in an interesting study. If you are a synesthete (or even if you are not) and would like to participate in studies at the RRC, please contact Christine Simmonds-Moore at the above email address. Likewise, Dr. John Palmer (the Director of Research at the Rhine Research Center) has also just been awarded a Bial grant and is also seeking research participants. People who are generally interested in getting involved in the research at the RRC should sign up to the participant pool, which can be accessed via the website at http://www.rhine.org/researchcurrent.htm.